

The Man of Law's Tale
Geoffrey Chaucer



Introduction to the Man of Law's Tale

The Words of the Host to the Company

Our host saw well that the bright sun had sped over a fourth part of the horizon-arc¹ between sunrise and sunset, and half an hour and more besides; and though he was not deeply expert in learning, he knew it was the eighteenth morning of April, which is the messenger to May. He saw also that the shadow of every tree was the same in length as the erect body that formed it; and therefore by the shadow his wit told him that Phoebus, shining so clear and bright, had climbed forty-five degrees into the sky, and for that day, in that latitude, that it must be ten o'clock. 14

And suddenly he pulled his horse around. "Gentle people," he said, "I warn you, this entire company, one fourth of the day is gone. For the love of God and St. John, lose no more time than you can help. Gentle people, time wastes away from us, day and night, secretly in our sleep and in our negligence in our waking hours, like a stream that descends from the mountain to the plain and never turns back. 24

"Well can Seneca and many philosophers bewail time lost more than gold lost from a treasure chest, for, as he said, 'loss of goods may be recovered, but loss of time ruins us.'" Surely, it will not come back any more than Malkyn's maidenhead², which she has lost in her wantonness. Let us not grow moldy then in idleness. 32

"Sir Man of Law," he said, "as you hope for happiness, tell us a tale, according to the agreement. You submitted freely to stand by my judgment in this thing; make good on your promise now. Then at the worst you will have done your duty." 38

"Host," he said, "I agree in God's name; my intent in no way is to break the agreement. A promise is a

¹ A fourth part of the horizon-arc. This is usually calculated as being between 9:00 and 9:30.

² Malkyn's maidenhead. Malkyn, form of Mary, is a name usually associated with a wanton woman.

debt, and I will gladly perform mine entirely; I can say no better than this. For the laws that a man imposes on another he should himself in justice observe; such is the old saying." 45

"But nonetheless, it is certain that at this time I know not how to tell a profitable tale that Chaucer, though he knows little about meter and skillful rhyming, has not told long ago in the best English he could find, as many people know. And if he has not told them in one book, dear brother, he has in another. He has told of more lovers than Ovid mentioned in his old Epistles³. Why should I tell of them again? 56

"In youth he wrote verses of Ceyx and Alcyone⁴, and since then he has spoken of every one of these noble wives and true lovers in Ovid. Whoever wishes to look in his large volume called *The Legend of Cupid's Saints*⁵ may see there the large open wounds of Lucrece and of Thisbe of Babylon, Dido's sword stroke for the false Aeneas, Phyllis hanging on the tree for love of her Demophon; the lament of Deianira, Hermione, and Hypsipyle, and of Ariadne upon the barren island standing in the sea; Leander drowned for Hero; the tears of Helen, the woe of Briseis and of you, Laodamia; your cruelty, Queen Medea, your little children hanging by the neck because your Jason was false to love! O, Hypermnestra, Penelope, and Alcestis, your wifehood he commends with the best! 76

"But certainly he writes no word of that wicked tale of Canace' and her sinful love⁶. To such cursed stories I say fie! Or of the story of Apollonius of Tyre⁷, how the cursed king Antiochus ill-used his daughter, where he threw her upon the pavement--such a horrible story. And therefore, with careful consideration, Chaucer never writes in any of his discourses of such abominations, nor will I rehearse such. 89

³ Epistles. Ovid's *Heroides* is a collection of letters (epistles) from women to the men who have abandoned them.

⁴ Ceyx and Alcyone. Chaucer retells this tale in *Book of the Duchess*, 62-220.

⁵ *The Legend of Cupid's Saints. The Legend of Good Women*, which contains all of the tales listed here, except Deianira (retold in the *Monks Tale*, 2119-35), Hermione (Orestes' lover), Hero (Leander's lover), Helen (wife of Menelaus, stolen by Paris), Briseis (lover of Achilles, taken by Agamemnon), Laodamia (Wife of Protesilaus), and Penelope (long-suffering wife of Odysseus).

⁶ Canace. Engaged in an incestuous love with her brother.

⁷ Apollonius of Tyre. Tale of a Greek nobleman who is persecuted after he reveals a king's incestuous relationship with his daughter.

"But now for my tale, what shall I do this day? I would not like to be likened to the Muses that are called Pierides⁸. (Readers of the book of *Metamorphoses* know what I mean.) But nonetheless, though I come after Chaucer with nothing but baked hawthorn berries⁹, I do not care one bean. 95

"I speak in prose and leave him to make the rhymes." And at that, with a sober countenance, he began his tale as you shall now hear. 98

The Prologue of the Man of Law's Tale

Oh hateful misfortune¹⁰! O Poverty so confounded with thirst, with cold, with hunger! You are ashamed in your heart to ask help; yet if you do not ask, then you are so pierced with need that sheer destitution unwraps your hidden wound. In spite of yourself, you must either steal or beg or borrow your livelihood. You blame Christ and say bitterly that he divides temporal riches unfairly. You sinfully blame your neighbor and say you have too little and he has everything. "In faith," you say, "at some point he shall pay for it, when his carcass burns in the coals, because he did not help the needy in their need." 112

Hear the judgment of the wise: "Better to die than live in poverty." "Your own neighbor will despise you." If you are poor, say goodbye to your dignity! Yet take this judgment of the wise man: "All the days of the poor are miserable."

Take care then, before you come to that point. 119

If you are poor, your brother hates you, and all your friends flee far from you, alas! O rich merchants, you are full of happiness. O noble, prudent people, in your good fortune your bags are not filled with double aces but with six and five¹¹, and merry may you dance at Christmas! You search through land and sea for your profits; like wise people, you know the whole condition of kingdoms; you are fathers of tidings and tales both of peace and strife. And now I should be destitute of tales, were it not for the fact

⁸ Pierides. The daughters of Pierus who thought themselves comparable to the nine Muses and were turned into nine magpies as a result.

⁹ Baked hawthorn berries. A simple dish, not considered very desirable.

¹⁰ Oh hateful misfortune! In the opening of this prologue as well as other parts of the Chaucer translates of parts of *De Contemptu Mundi* (*On Contempt for the World*), which Chaucer notes in *Legend of Good Women* that he has translated.

¹¹ double aces...six and five. The former is a losing combination at dice, and the later is a winning combination.

that a merchant many years ago had not taught me a tale that I shall now tell. 133

Here begins the Man of Law's Tale.

Once there dwelt in Syria a company of rich merchants, forthright and honest, who sent out far and wide their spices, their cloth of gold, and their richly-hued satins. Their wares were so excellent and so fresh that everyone delighted to trade with them, and to sell to them as well. Now it happened that the chief men of this craft prepared to go to Rome, for trade or pleasure; they would send no other messenger, but, in a word, went themselves to Rome, and took their lodging in a place that seemed advantageous for them. 147

When these merchants had traveled in that city for a certain time, as suited their pleasure, it happened that from day to day the excellent renown of the emperor's daughter, Lady Constance, was reported to them in every detail, just as I shall tell you. The common talk of every man was, "Our Emperor of Rome--may God protect him--has such a daughter that in terms of goodness and beauty there has never been another like her since the world began. I pray God to uphold her in honor. May she be queen of all Europe! In her is great beauty without vanity, youth without folly or crudeness. Virtue is her guide in all her works, humility has slain all arrogance in her, and she is the mirror of courtesy. Her heart is a very shrine of holiness; her hand, a liberal minister of almsgiving." And all this report was true, just as God is true. 169

But now to the merchants. They had their ships filled once more, and when they had seen this blessed maiden, they went merrily home to Syria and did their affairs as before and lived in happiness. I can say no more. 175

Now it happened that these merchants stood in the favor of the Sultan of Syria, and when they came from a foreign place he would entertain them with benign courtesy, and diligently inquire for tidings of various realms, to learn of the wonders that they might have seen or heard. 182

Among other things, these merchants gave him especially such a noble and full a report of Lady Constance that the Sultan gained great delight to hold her image in his mind, and all his pleasure and concern was to love her for his entire life. 189

By chance, in that broad book that is called the heavens it was written with stars at his birth that he

should die for love, alas! For in the stars is written, clearer than glass, if people could read it, the death of every man. In the stars was written the death of Hector, Achilles, Pompey, Julius¹², many years before they were born; the strife of Thebes¹³, the death of Hercules, of Sampson, Turnus and Socrates¹⁴. But men's wits are so dull that none can wholly read it. 203

This Sultan sent for his confidential advisors, and, to pass over this matter quickly, declared his intent and told them truly that unless he could have grace to win Constance within a short time, he was no better than dead, and charged them speedily to devise some means to save him. Different men said different things. They argued, debated back and forth, brought forth many subtle opinions, talked of magic and deceit, but finally could see no help in that nor in anything else, except marriage. 217

Then they saw in this matter such difficulty on the grounds of reason, to speak quite plainly, because of the difference between their religions. They believed that no "Christian prince would gladly wed his child under our sweet faith, which was taught us by Mohammed, our prophet." 224

"Rather than lose Constance," he answered, "I will be christened, without a doubt. I must be hers, I can choose no other. I pray you hold your arguments in peace. Save my life and do not neglect to get her who has my life in her power, for I cannot longer endure this woe." 231

What need is there for more words? I say that by treaty and negotiation, and by mediation of the Pope and all the Church and knighthood, for the destruction of Mohammedanism and the profit of Christ's dear faith, such an agreement was made as you shall hear. The Sultan and his barons and all his

¹² Hector . . . Pompey. Hector. Prince and champion of the Trojans. Achilles. Greek hero who defeated Hector in battle, as told in the last books of Homer's *Iliad*. Pompey, Julius: Initially allies, Roman General Pompey (106-48BC) and Roman Emperor Julius Caesar, along with Crassus, formed the First Triumvirate in 60 BC., but the two later became enemies. Caesar was assassinated by his closest followers and Pompey, having been defeated at Pharsala (48 BC) was assassinated by one of his soldiers.

¹³ Strife of Thebes. Usually referred to as the "Siege of Thebes," retold in *Troilus and Criseyde* 1485-1510.

¹⁴ Hercules . . . Socrates. Hercules: mythical Greek hero (see *Monk's Tale* 2095-2142); Sampson: Biblical hero (see *Monk's Tale* 2015-94). Turnus: Rutulian prince who is betrothed to Lavinia until Aeneas defeats him in the last book of *The Aeneid*. Socrates: Greek Philosopher (469-399 BC) of Athens, teacher of Plato.

subjects should be christened, and he should have Constance in marriage and a certain amount of gold, I do not know how much. This agreement was sworn to by either side, with sufficient pledges. Now, fair Constance, may God almighty guide you! 245

Some people, I suppose, will now look for me to describe all the provisions that the emperor, in his great splendor, prepared for his daughter, Lady Constance. But all will see that nobody could tell in few words of all of the preparations that were made for so high a matter. Bishops were appointed to go with her, lords, ladies, famous knights and plenty of other people. Throughout the town it was proclaimed that every one should devoutly pray to Christ to bless this marriage and make this journey a success. 259

The day of her departing had come, the woeful, fatal day. No more waiting now; everyone prepared to go forth and away. Constance arises, entirely pale and overcome with sorrow, and prepares herself to go, for she sees well there is no other choice. Alas! What wonder if she wept, as she was to be sent to a strange nation, away from the friends who had protected her so tenderly, and to be bound in subjection to one whose manners she did not know? Husbands are all good and always were; wives know this; I dare tell you nothing else! 273

"Father," she said, "and you, my mother, my sovereign pleasure above all except Christ on high, Constance, your wretched child, your young daughter, commends herself earnestly to your grace, for I go to Syria, and I shall ever see you more with my eyes. Alas! I must now go to the nation of Barbary¹⁵, since it is your will. May Christ, who died to redeem us, give me grace to fulfill his commands, regardless of whether I, a wretched woman, should perish. Women are born to servitude and suffering, and to be under man's control." 287

I know that not at Troy, when Pyrrhus¹⁶ broke down the wall before Ilium was burnt, nor at the city of Thebes, nor at Rome when Hannibal¹⁷ had three times vanquished the Romans, was there heard such tender piteous weeping as in the chamber at her

¹⁵ Barbary. On the northern coast of Africa. She may also be indicating that she is headed to a barbarian or heathen nation.

¹⁶ Pyrrhus. Son of Achilles and Deidamia. See Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale* 3355-59 and Vergil's *Aeneid* 2.469-90.

¹⁷ Hannibal. Carthaginian general (247-182 BC) whose fame lies in his crossing the Alps with a pack of elephants and a small military force and winning a series of battles throughout Italy.

departure. But whether she might sing or weep, she must go forth. 294

Oh cruel firmament, the first mover, that with your diurnal sway ever pushes and hurls everything from east to west, which in natural motion would take another course, your pushing set the heavens in such a configuration at the beginning of this disastrous journey that cruel Mars blasted this marriage¹⁸. Alas, inauspicious tortuous ascendant, the lord of which is fallen helpless out of his angle into the darkest house! Ah, malevolent planet Mars! Ah, feeble moon, unfortunate are your steps! You are in conjunction where you are not well received by a favorable planet; you have departed from where you were auspicious. 308

Alas, imprudent emperor! Was there no astrologer in your whole town? Is no time better than another for such a wedding? Is there no choice of time for a journey, especially to people of high station, even when a person's date of birth is known¹⁹? Alas, we are too ignorant or too slothful! 315

This fair and woeful maiden is brought to the ship with solemnity and ceremony. "May Jesus Christ be with you all now!" she said, and that was all except "Farewell, fair Constance!" She strives to show a cheerful look. And I leave her sailing forth thus and will return to the Syrians. 322

The mother of the Sultan, a well-spring of vices, has detected her son's full intent to forsake his old sacrifices. At once she summoned her council; and when they were assembled to learn her will, she sat down and spoke as you shall now hear. 329

"Lords," she said, "every one of you knows that my son is on the point of abandoning the holy laws of our Koran given by God's messenger Mohammed. But I make one vow to the great God: the life shall sooner vanish from of my body than Mohammed's law from my heart. What should this new faith bring us but slavery and penance to our bodies, and afterward to be dragged to hell because we denied Mohammed, the founder of our faith? But sirs, will you give me your pledges, agreeing to my plan, which I shall tell you and which may secure us evermore? 343

¹⁸ Blasted this marriage. The narrator claims that the position of the heavenly bodies, the movement of which are initiated by the first mover or *primum mobile*, influenced the fate of the marriage of the Sultan and Constance. The evil effect of Mars and the weak position of the Moon are largely responsible.

¹⁹ Date of birth is known. The date of birth determines one's horoscope.

They swore and agreed, every one of them, to stand by her in life and death, and each as best he could to draw all his friends to strengthen her cause. Thereupon she undertook the enterprise of which you shall hear, and spoke to them thus: "First we shall pretend to accept the Christian faith--cold water will only trouble us a little! Then I will make such a feast and revel that I shall repay the Sultan for his deeds, I believe. No matter how white his wife christened may be, she will need to wash away the red even if she should bring with her a font-full of water²⁰." 357

O, Sultanness, you root of iniquity! Virago²¹, you second Semiramis²²! O, serpent under the form of woman, like that serpent that is bound deep in hell! O, counterfeit woman, all that can destroy virtue and innocence through your malice is bred in you, the nest of every sin! O Satan, envious since that day you were chased from our heritage, you know well the old path to women! You made Eve bring us into bondage; you will ruin this Christian marriage. Alas, alas! You make women your instrument, when you wish to deceive. 371

This Sultanness, whom I blame thus and curse, secretly dismissed her council. Why delay the tale longer? One day she rode to the Sultan and told him that she would renounce her faith and receive baptism from priests' hands, repenting that she had been a heathen so long, beseeching him to grant her the honor to have the Christian people to a feast: "To please them I will do my duty." 381

The Sultan replied, "I will act according to your request," and kneeling thanked her for that request. He was so glad that he did not know what to say. Then she kissed her son and went homeward. 385

Here ends the first part.

Here follows the second part.

These Christian people arrived in Syria with a large and stately following. Straightway the Sultan sent his messenger, first to his mother and then to the entire

²⁰ Font-full of water. This may be a reference to the Christian sacrament of baptism.

²¹ Virago. A woman who usurps the place of a man. Likewise, the Sultanness is referred to as a "counterfeit woman" ("feyned womman") in the same paragraph.

²² Semiramus. Queen of Assyria (c. 900 BC), known for here lust, who persuaded her husband, King Ninus, to surrender power to her for five days, during which time she turned his supporters against him and seized the throne herself.

surrounding realm, to say his wife had truly come. He asked his mother to ride to meet the queen for the honor of his realm. The crowd was huge and the spectacle was rich, when the Syrians and Romans met together. The Sultan's mother, richly and splendidly attired, received Constance with as glad an expression as any mother could show to her dear daughter, and then they rode to the nearest city with slow and stately pace. Not the triumph of Julius, of which Lucan²³ boasts, was more royal or more sumptuous than this joyous assembly. But under it all this scorpion, this wicked spirit, the Sultaness, for all her flattery, was planning to give a mortal sting. 406

The Sultan himself came soon after in royal fashion wondrous to speak of; and welcomed her with all joy and bliss. Thus in mirth and joy I leave them, for the fruit of it all is what I tell. When the time came it was thought wise that the revelry should cease, and all went to rest. 413

The time came for the feast which this old Sultaness had ordained, and to it all the Christian people went, both young and old. Here one could see a royal feast, and more fine food and drink than I can describe to you. 419

But before they rose from their seats they paid too dearly for it. Oh sudden woe, ever successor to the bliss of this world, which is ever sprinkled with bitterness, the end of the joy of our earthly labors! Woe is the end of our gladness. Listen to this counsel for your security: on the day of joy do not forget the unknown woe or harm that follows. 427

For to tell shortly, in a word, the Sultan and every Christian, except Lady Constance alone, were stabbed and hewn in pieces at the table. This old Sultaness, cursed crone, had through her friends done this cursed deed, because she wished to govern all the country. Nor was there a Syrian who was converted and knew the counsel of the Sultan that was not all hewn to pieces before he could escape. They took Constance instantly and set her on a ship, without a rudder, God knows, and told her to learn to sail from Syria back again to Italy. 441

They put with her a certain treasure that she had brought, to tell the truth, and a great store of food and clothes, and then she sailed forth on the salt sea. O my Constance, full of kindness, O beloved young daughter of an emperor, may He who is lord of fortune be your rudder! 448

²³ Lucan. Marcus Annaeus Lucanus (39-65 AD) in his *Pharsalia* records Julius Caesar's boast before the battle.

She crossed herself and in a very pitiful voice cried unto the cross of Christ and said: "Oh bright blessed altar, holy cross, red with the piteous blood of the Lamb that washed the world clean of the old iniquity, guard me from the fiend and from his claws on that day when I shall be drowned in the deep. Victorious tree, protection of the faithful, which alone was worthy to bear the king of heaven with His fresh wounds, the white Lamb That was hurt with the spear, you expeller of fiends out of man and woman, over whom your sheltering arms reach out, preserve me and give me the strength to amend my life." 462

For years and days this creature floated through the sea of Greece to the straits of Morocco, as it was her Fortune. She would have to feed on many sorry meals; often she looked for her death, before the wild waves drove her to a resting-place. 470

One may ask why she was not also slain at the feast; who could have saved her body? Who saved Daniel²⁴, I answer, in the horrible cave where everyone, master and man, except Daniel, was devoured by the lion before they could escape? None but God, whom Daniel bore in his heart. On her God would show His wondrous miracle, so that we might see His mighty acts. 478

Christ, who is the sovereign remedy to every harm, often does a thing, as scholars know, by certain means for certain ends, fully unknown to man's comprehension; we are too ignorant to understand His wise providence. But now, since she was not slain at the feast, who saved her from drowning in the sea? Who kept Jonah²⁵ in the mouth of the fish until he was spouted up at Nineveh? Well may one know it was none but He who saved the Hebrew people from drowning, and led them with dry feet through the sea. Who ordered the four spirits of the tempest that have power to unsettle the land and sea, both north and south and east and west, "disturb neither sea nor land nor tree? Truly, He who gave that command preserved this woman, sleeping and awake, from the tempest. From what source could this woman have meat and drink for three years and more? How did her provisions last that long? Who fed St. Mary the Egyptian²⁶ in the cavern or in the desert? None but

²⁴ Daniel. His story is told in the Biblical book of Daniel.

²⁵ Johah. His story is retold in the Biblical book of Jonah.

²⁶ Mary the Egyptian. Also known as Mary of Alexandria, a fifth-century prostitute who reformed her ways on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and then lived the remaining forty-seven years of her life as a desert hermit. Her story is included in *The South English Legendary* and numerous other references.

Christ, indeed; it was as great a marvel to feed five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. God sent His abundance in her great need. 504

She drove forth through our wild sea into our ocean and until at length the waves cast her up under a stronghold whose name I do not know, far into Northumberland. Her ship stuck so firmly in the sand that for the length of the tide could not move from there; Christ's will was that she should wait there. 511

The constable of the castle came down to see the wreck, and searched the whole ship and found this weary careworn woman, and the treasure she brought as well. In her own language she begged him for mercy, and to take the life from her body, to deliver her from her woe. Her speech was a manner of corrupt Latin, but nevertheless he understood her. When the constable had seen enough, he took this woeful woman to land, and she kneeled down and thanked God for what he had sent. But what she was she would tell no person for happiness or woe, even if she were to die for it; she said that, by her word, she was so bewildered in the sea that she had lost her memory. The constable and his wife felt such pity for her that they wept in compassion. She was so diligent and eager to serve and please every one in that castle that all those who looked on her face loved her. 532

This constable and his wife, Lady Hermengild, and that entire country were pagans, but Hermengild loved her as her own soul, and Constance remained so long with many bitter tears and fervent prayers that Jesus in His grace converted dame Hermengild, the Lady Constableness. No Christians in all that land dared assemble; the Christian people had fled from there in fear of the pagans, who had conquered all the regions of the north, by sea and land. The old Christian Britons that dwelt in this isle had fled to Wales, which was their refuge for the time. Yet the Briton Christians were not so banished that there were not some who secretly honored Christ and beguiled the heathen people. And near the castle dwelt three such Christians, one of them blind, who could see only with the eyes of the soul, with which men see when they are blind. Bright was the sun on that summer's day when the constable and his wife and Constance took the road toward the sea for a little season, to amuse themselves and to roam about. "In the name of Christ," cried this blind Briton, "give me back my sight, Lady Hermengild." 562

This lady grew fearful at the words, lest her husband would slay her for her love to Jesus Christ. But

Constance emboldened her and told her do the will of Christ, as a daughter of His church. 567

The constable was abashed at this. "What does all this business mean?" he said. 569

"Sir, it is the power of Christ," Constance answered, "who saves people from the snare of the fiend." And so far she set forth our faith that, before evening came, she had converted the constable and made him believe in Christ. 574

This constable was not lord of this place of which I speak, where he had found Constance, but had held it strongly, many years long, under Alla, king of Northumberland; who was wise and valiant in his deeds against the Scots, as people read in books. But now I return to my story. 581

Satan, who always watches in order to beguile us, saw all Constance's perfection and plotted how he might pay her back. He caused a young knight of that town to love her with such foul lust, that he truly thought he should perish unless he could have his will. He wooed her, but it did not matter: she would commit no sin. Then, for cruel hate, he composed a plan to make her die a shameful death. He watched for a time when the constable was away and one night crept secretly into Hermengild's chamber. Weary with vigils and prayers, Constance and Hermengild were sleeping. Tempted by Satan, this knight went very softly to the bed, cut Hermengild's throat in two, laid the bloody knife beside Lady Constance; and then went his way. May God give ill-fortune to him! 602

Soon after the constable came home with Alla, king of that country, and saw his wife cruelly slain, and often wept and wrung his hands; and beside Constance in the bed he found the bloody knife. Alas! What could she say? Out of true grief her wit had left her. To King Alla all this calamity was told, as well as the time, the place, and in what fashion Lady Constance was found in a ship, as you have heard it told before. The king's heart began to tremble with pity when he saw so gentle a creature fallen into grief and misfortune, for, like a lamb led to its death, this innocent woman stood before the king, while the false knight who had created the treason accused her of the crime. 620

Nevertheless there was great mourning among the people, who said they could not imagine that she had done such wickedness, for they had seen she was always so virtuous and loved Hermengild as she loved her own life. And to this every one in that

household bore witness, except he who had slain Hermengild with his knife. And now the noble king was strongly moved by this witness and thought he would inquire deeper into these things to learn a truth. 630

Alas Constance! You have no champion at arms, nor can you fight for yourself; alack! But may He that died to redeem us and bound Satan there where he still lies be your strong champion this day! For unless Christ should show an open miracle, you shall without delay be slain, though guiltless. She dropped upon her knees and said, "Immortal God, Who didst save Susanna from false blame, and you, merciful maiden, daughter of Saint Anne, Mary, before whose Child angels sing 'Alleluia,' if I be guiltless of this crime, save me; or else I shall die 644

Have you not sometimes seen in a crowd the pale face of one who is being led to his death? By its hue might one know the face that was in peril among all the faces in that crowd? In this way Constance stood and looked about her. O, you queens, living in prosperity, duchesses and all ladies, have some pity on her adversity! It is an emperor's daughter who stands alone; she has no creature to whom she may lament. O, blood of royalty, standing so in peril, your friends are far away in your time of need. 658

King Alla had such compassion (as a gentle heart is always full of pity) that from his eyes tears ran down. "Now fetch a book immediately," he said, "and if this knight will swear she slew this woman, then we will consider whom we will have as judge." A book of the Gospels in the British tongue was fetched and upon it the knight swore that she was guilty. At that point a hand struck him on the neck so that he fell down instantly like a stone, and in the sight of everybody in that place both his eyes burst from his face. 672

A voice was heard by all: "You have slandered without the innocent daughter of Holy Church in the royal presence. You have done so, and yet do I hold my peace?" 676

At this marvel all the crowd was aghast, except Constance alone, and all stood dazed in fear of vengeance. Great was the fear and repentance of those who had wrongly suspected this blessed innocent Constance. And, in conclusion, by this miracle and by Constance's mediation, the king and many others there were converted in that place, thanks to Christ's grace! This false knight, by Alla's judgment, was speedily slain for his treachery; and yet Constance had great pity for his death. And after this, in His mercy, Jesus made Alla wed with all

honor this holy maiden, so bright and beautiful. Thus Christ made Constance a queen. 693

But who, in very truth, was woeful for their marriage but Donegild, the mother of the king, so full of arrogance? It seemed that her cursed heart would burst at her son's deed; it seemed a dishonor that he should take for his wife so alien a creature. 700

I would not take such account of the chaff and straw as of the wheat²⁷; why should I speak of the royal array at the marriage, what course went first at the banquet, who blows a horn or trumpet? Only the fruit of every tale is to be set forth. There was eating and drinking, and people danced and sang and enjoyed themselves. 707

The went to bed, as was reasonable and right; for though wives may be very holy creatures, they must endure in patience at night the sorts of necessary things that are pleasing to people who are wedded with rings, and lay aside their holiness a little for a season. This is the best thing to do. 714

In due time Alla begat on her a child, a boy, and when he went to Scotland to encounter his foes, he committed her to a bishop and his constable. And soon fair Constance, the humble and meek, was so far along with child that she remained in her chamber quietly, awaiting Christ's pleasure, until her time came and she brought forth a boy; at the baptismal font they named him Maurice. 723

The constable called a messenger and wrote to his king Alla the happy tidings, and other news profitable to be told. He took the letter and went his way, but seeking his own advantage rides first to the king's mother and greets her fairly in these words: "Madame, you may be glad and merry and thank God a hundred thousand times. My lady queen truly has a child, to the joy and bliss of this entire realm. Lo, here are the sealed letters concerning it, which I must carry with all haste. If you would say anything to your son the king, I am your servant, day and night²⁸." 739

²⁷ Wheat and chaff. Chaucer often makes use of the image of the kernel or fruit of the wheat (corn) in contrast with the chaff and straw. The wheat is the essential part of the story, whereas the chaff is the dressing, the non-essential part. At times, it is difficult to say if Chaucer is in earnest or game when he uses this imagery.

²⁸ I am your servant, day and night. In other words, he would be glad to deliver a message for her whenever she would like him to deliver it.

"At this time, no," Donegild replied; "but I wish that you rest here all night and tomorrow I will tell you what I wish." 742

The messenger drank heavily of wine and ale and while he slept like a swine his letters were secretly stolen from his box; and another letter concerning this matter was skillfully counterfeited and sinfully wrought, addressed to the king as if from the constable. The letter said, "The queen has delivered so horrible and fiendish a creature that nobody was so bold as to remain in the castle. The mother was an elf; perhaps sent by charms or sorcery, and every creature hates her company. 756

Woeful was the king at this letter, but he told his sore distress to nobody and wrote back with his own hand, "May the will of Christ always be welcome to me who am now versed in His doctrine. Lord, may Your will and pleasure be welcome; all my desires I place under Your governance. Keep this child, whether it is ugly or beautiful, and my wife as well, until my home-coming. When it so pleases Him, Christ may send me an heir more agreeable than this to my mind." Secretly weeping he sealed the letter and delivered it to the messenger, who went forth and away. 770

Oh messenger, full of drunkenness, your breath is strong, your limbs are always faltering, and you reveal all secrets. Your mind is lost, you jangle like a jay. Your face has taken on a new appearance. Where drunkenness abounds, no doubt, in any company, no secret is hidden. Oh, Donegild, I have no English fit for your malice and your tyranny! Therefore I commit you to the fiend: let him indict you on your treachery! Fie, brutish woman, fie! O, no, by God, I lie. Fie, fiendish spirit! For I dare to say your spirit is in hell, though you walk here. 784

The messenger returned from the king's court and again alighted at the court of the king's mother, and she was very glad about this and pleased him in all that she could. He drank and stuffed his girdle well; he sleeps and snores in his swinish way all night until the sun began to rise. 791

Again his letters were stolen, every one, and letters were counterfeited in this way: "The king commands his constable immediately, on pain of hanging and high justice, by no means to allow Constance to remain in his realm three and a quarter days. But he shall put her, her young son, and all her belongings in the same ship in which he found her, and push her out from the shore and charge her never more to return." Ah my Constance, well may your spirit have

fear and the dreams in your sleep be of suffering, when Donegild devised this order! 805

In the morning, when he woke, the messenger took the shortest course to the castle and delivered his letter to the constable, who, when he saw what the pitiful letter said, said again and again, "alack!" and "alas!" "Lord Christ," he said, "how can this world endure with so many creatures so full of sin? O mighty God, if it is your will, since you are a righteous judge, how could it be that you would allow innocence to perish and the wicked to reign in prosperity? O good Constance, alas! So woeful am I since I must be your tormenter, or die a death of shame. There is no other way!" 819

Both young and old in that entire place wept when the king sent this accursed letter. On the fourth day, Constance with a deadly pale face went her way toward the ship; but nonetheless, she bore the will of Christ in good spirit, and kneeling on the shore said, "Lord, what you send is always welcome! He who kept me from the false accusation while I dwelt among you on land will keep me safe from harm and shame on the salt sea, though I know not how. He is still as strong as He ever was. In Him I trust and in his dear mother, who is to me my sail and my rudder." Her little child lay weeping upon her arm, and kneeling she said full of pity to him, "Peace, little son, I will not harm you." Having said that, she drew her kerchief from her head and laid it over his little eyes and lulled him in her arms. 839

Then she cast her eyes to heaven. "Mother," she said, "Mary, bright maid, it is true that through woman's tempting, mankind was lost and ever doomed to death; for which your Child was stretched and torn upon the cross. Your blessed eyes beheld all His torment; then is there no comparison between your woe and any that humans may endure. You saw your Child slain before your eyes, and yet my little child still lives, by my faith. Now lady bright, to whom all the woeful cry for aid, glory of womanhood, fair maiden, haven of refuge, bright star of day, have pity on my child, who by your gentility pities every pitiful creature in distress! 854

"Alas, little child! What is your guilt who have never yet committed sinned? Why would your harsh father destroy you? Oh mercy, dear constable!" she said, "Let my little child dwell here with you. But if you dare not save him, kiss him once in his father's name. Then, looking back toward the land she said, "Farewell, ruthless husband!" And up she rose and walked down the shore to the ship. All the people followed her; and she continued to sooth her weeping

child, and she took her leave, crossed herself with a holy heart and entered into the ship. 868

The ship was provisioned, no doubt, abundantly for her needs for a long time; and she had plenty of other necessities, praised be God's grace. May God almighty provide the wind and weather and bring her home! I can say no more but that she drives forth over the sea. 875

Here ends the second part.

Here follows the third part.

Soon after this Alla the king came home to his castle, and asked for his wife and child. The constable's heart turned cold, but told him fully all the deeds that you have heard--I can tell it no better again--and showed the king his seal and his letter. He said, "Lord, as you commanded me on pain of death, so have I done, truly." The messenger was tortured until he would confess, flat and plain, where he had lodged from night to night. And thus by wit and subtle inquiry they imagined from whom this evil sprang. The hand that had written the letter was discovered, and all the venom of this cursed deed; but in what way I do not know. 893

The end was, as people may plainly read, that Alla slew his mother because she was a traitor to her allegiance, and thus ends old Donegild—and a plague on her! But the sorrow of Alla for his wife and child, night and day, no tongue can tell. 899

Now I will return to Constance, who floated in pain and woe on the seas five years and more, as pleased Christ's providence, before her ship approached land. Under a heathen castle at last, of which I do not find the name in my text, the sea threw her and her child. Almighty God, who saved all mankind, keep in mind Constance and her child, who have fallen again on a heathen land, in danger of death, as you shall all soon see. 910

Down from the castle came many people to stare at the ship and on Constance. But in short, one night the lord's steward--may God send him evil--a thief who had denied our faith, came down from the castle into the ship alone and said he would be her lover, whether she wished it or not. Woeful indeed was this wretched woman then. Her child cried, and she cried lamentably. But blessed Mary helped her quickly, for with her successful struggling the thief speedily fell overboard and was drowned in the sea for punishment. And thus Christ kept Constance spotless. O foul sin of lust, behold your end! Not only do you

weaken the mind of man, but truly you will ruin his body too. 927

The end of your deed and of your blind desires is lamentation. How many there are who are either slain or shamed, not only for the deed but also for the intent to do the sin! But how should this weak woman have the strength to defend her against this renegade? O Goliath, immeasurable and huge, how could David overthrow you, he so young and lacking in armor? How dared he to look on your dreadful face? Man may see it was through God's favor. Who gave Judith the hardiness to kill Holofernes²⁹ in his tent and deliver God's people from wretchedness? I ask it for this reason: that just as God sent to her the spirit of vigor to save her from disaster, so he sent might and vigor to Constance. 945

Out through the narrow mouth between Gibraltar and Morocco went her ship driving ceaselessly, sometimes west, sometimes south and north and east, for many weary days. At length Christ's mother (may she be ever blessed!) through her love put an end to her heaviness. 952

Now let us leave Constance for a little and speak of the Roman emperor. Through letters from Syria he had learned of the slaughter of Christian people and the shame done to his daughter by a false traitor--I mean the cursed wicked Sultanness--and how at the feast she had caused the murder of great and small. 959

For this reason, to take high vengeance on the Syrians, he had sent, under royal ordinance, his senator and many other lords, God knows. For many days they burned and slew and laid waste; but at the last they were repairing victoriously to Rome. As the senator was royally sailing, the book tells, he met the ship driving on in which Constance sat very piteously. He did not know at all who she was nor why she was in such a plight; nor would she tell of her condition, even to save her life. He brought her to Rome and delivered her and her young son to his wife; and there she lived her life. Thus could our Lady bring poor Constance out of woe; and many others since. For a long time God granted her to dwell in that place in holy works. The senator's wife was her aunt, yet never recognized her despite that fact. But I will delay no longer here; I will return to

²⁹ Judith . . . Holofernes. The story of Judith and Holofernes is told in the Biblical book of Judith. Holofernes, the Assyrian general, has designs to rape the Hebrew maiden Judith, who decapitates him when he returns drunk to his chamber after feasting with his men.

King Alla, whom I left weeping and sighing sorely for his wife, and I will now leave Constance in the senator's care. 987

King Alla, having slain his mother, one day fell into such remorse that at last he came to Rome to receive penance. He submitted himself to the Pope's will in things great and small, and sought Jesus Christ to forgive the wicked works he had done. The news of how Alla the king was coming on pilgrimage spread throughout Rome, by couriers that went before him. 997

For this reason the senator and many of his lineage rode to meet him, according to the custom, as much to display his own splendid courtesy as to do reverence to a king. This noble senator and King Alla showed great honor to one another; great honor and friendship the noble senator showed to Alla, and he to the senator also. Within a day or two, it happened that the senator feasted with King Alla and, in a word, if I err not, Constance's son went with him. Some say that it was at Constance's request that he led this child to the feast. I cannot tell every point. Be as it may, there he was; and it is also true that at his mother's bidding, during meal, the child stood looking in the king's face. Alla had great marvel at the child and soon asked the senator, "Whose is the fair child standing there?" 1018

"By God and St. John," he answered, "I know not! He has a mother, but he has no father that I know of." And briefly he told Alla how the child was found. "But God knows," said the senator also, "one of so virtuous a life as his mother I never saw nor heard of among all the women of this world, maidens or wives. I dare well say she would rather have a blade through her breast than to be a sinful woman; no man could bring her to that deed." 1029

Now this child was as similar to Constance as a creature could be. Alla had her face in his heart, and mused on this if the child's mother could by chance be she who had been his wife. Secretly he sighed and made such speed from the table as he could. "My faith!" he thought, "there is a phantom in my head. By reasonable judgment I ought to deem that my wife is drowned in the salt sea." Yet again he reasoned, "How might I know that Christ has not sent her here by sea, just as He sent her to my country from another?" 1043

After noon, Alla went home with the senator to prove this wondrous thing. The senator showed him great honor and immediately sent for Constance. Trust me, she cared not to dance when she

understood the message; scarcely could she stand upon her feet. When Alla saw his wife he greeted her kindly and so wept that it was pity to behold. At the first look he cast upon her he knew her full well to be his wife. But she, for sorrow, stood speechless as a tree; so was her heart shut up in pain when she remembered his unkindness, and twice she swooned before his eyes. He wept and piteously made his defense: "Now may God and all His bright saints so surely have mercy on my soul as I am as guiltless of your woe as Maurice my son, who is so like you. If this is not so, may the fiend fetch me from this place!" It was long before the sobbing and the bitter pangs could ease their hearts; it was piteous to hear their weeping, which seemed to increase their woe. I pray you, release me from my labors. I cannot tell of their woe all the long day, as I am weary of sorrow. But finally, when the truth was known, that Alla was not the cause of her pain, they kissed a hundred times, I believe. 1074

There was such bliss between them that, except for the joy everlasting, no creature has ever seen the like nor shall see, as long as the world endures. 1078

Then she prayed meekly that her husband in relief of her long, pitiful pains would pray her father especially that of his majesty he might promise to dine with him some day. She begged also that he should by no means say a word to him about her. 1085

Some men say that the child Maurice took this message to the emperor. But I believe Alla was not so foolish as to send any child to one of such sovereign dignity, the flower of Christendom; it is better to suppose he went himself. This emperor courteously agreed to dine as he was asked, and I find it in the books that he looked earnestly upon the child and thought on his daughter. Alla went to his lodging, and, as was fitting for him, furnished out the feast in every way as far as he knew how. The morning came and Alla and his wife prepared to escort the emperor, and they rode forth in joy and gladness. When she saw her father she alighted from her horse and fell on her knees. "Father," she said, "your young child Constance is now clean gone from your mind. But I am your daughter Constance, whom you once sent to Syria. It is I, father, who was put alone upon the salt sea and doomed to die. Now, good father, I cry you mercy. Send me no more to heathen lands, but thank my lord here for his kindness." 1113

Who can describe the pathetic joy of those three, thus united? But I must make an end of my tale; the day goes fast and I must delay no more. These happy

people sat down to dine, and I will leave them in a thousand-fold more joy and bliss than I can tell. 1120

This child Maurice was afterwards made emperor by the Pope, and lived as a good Christian and did great honor to Christ's church. But I will pass by his full story, for my tale is mostly of Constance. In old Roman chronicles one may read Maurice's life; I do not bear it in mind. When he saw his time, King Alla came directly back to England, with Constance his sweet and holy wife, and there they lived in joy and quiet. 1131

But little while the joy of this world lasts, I promise you time will not wait: from day to night it changes. Who lived ever one day in such delight that neither conscience moved him, or anger, appetite or some kind of terror, envy, pride, passion, or some injury? I set down this truth only for this reason: that Alla's bliss with Constance endured but a little while in joy and in delight. For Death, who takes his tax from high and low, took away King Alla from this world when a year had passed; let us pray God's mercy on his soul! For him Lady Constance endured great heaviness, but at last went her way back to the town of Rome. There the holy creature found her friends all safe and sound; and thus had she escaped out of all her misadventures. When she met her father, she fell upon her knees to the earth, and weeping for the pathetic joy of her heart, she praised God a hundred thousand times. In virtue and holy deeds of charity they lived together, and never went asunder until death parted them. 1158

And now farewell; my tale is done. And may Jesus Christ, Who through His might may send joy after woe, govern us in His grace and guard us all in this place! Amen. 1162

Here ends the Tale of the Man of Law.

The Epilogue of the Man of Law's Tale

Our Host stood up in his stirrups and said, "Good men, listen, all of you. This was a profitable tale and a timely one. Sir Parish Priest, by God's bones, tell us a tale as you agreed. By God's dignity, I see that you men educated in great learning know many good things." 1169

The Parson answered, "Bless me! What ails you to swear so sinfully?" 1171

Our Host answered, "Ho, Johnnykin, you are there, are you? I smell a Lollard³⁰ in the wind. How now, good men, listen and stay a bit, for by God's worthy pains we shall have a sermon. This Lollard here will preach us something!" 1177

"Nay, that he shall not, by my father's soul," said the Shipman. "He shall not preach here, nor interpret any gospel text. We all believe in the one great God; he would spring on us some difficulty, or sow tares in our clean corn. Therefore, Host, I warn you in advance, my jolly body shall give you a story, and I shall clink you so merry a bell that I shall wake you all! But it shall not be of philosophy, or physis, or curious law-phrases. I have but little Latin in my belly!" 1190

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³⁰ Lollard. Originally the followers of John Wyclif, the Lollards were, in a narrow sense, proto-Protestants, who objected to the corruptions of the late Medieval Church, and caused a shift in English Church practices and spirituality. Presumably, the Parson's objection to swearing, i.e., the Host's swearing the oath "By God's bones, signals to the Host that the Parson is a Lollard, though non-Lollards also objected to swearing as well.